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ABSTRACT

An African centered curriculum has two parts. It is both a process that centers around the cultural heritage of African Americans, and the infusion of content that will stimulate and/or reinforce the growth and development of African and African-American mental and ethical traits. The scholars who are the main proponents of an African centered curriculum argue that the existing curriculum is overwhelmingly white and European in outlook and content, and reinforces insensitivity among whites leaving black children feeling inferior and disconnected from their studies. The proponents also point out several specific omissions and distortions in the curriculum as it is currently taught in most school systems and universities. These deficiencies include the contention that there is no significant history of African people in most academic disciplines before the slave trade. Critics of African centered education argue that the scholarship behind this movement is historically inaccurate, that the rhetoric of the advocates of an African centered curriculum is racially divisive and that, in some instances, the advocates represent a new form of racial intolerance. In addition to surveying the debate over an African centered curriculum, this paper also briefly summarizes the movement for multicultural education and the efforts of the District of Columbia Public School System to develop a multicultural curriculum. (DB)

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by
Frances J. Powell

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African Centered Education: What Is It and Why Do We Need It?

by Frances J. Powell

African-Centered Education means different things to different people. This article discusses what is meant by an African centered curriculum by its proponents, summarizes the major arguments against an African centered curriculum and reports on the response to this movement in the District of Columbia Public Schools.

African-Centered Education: What Is It?

The definition of an African-centered curriculum changes depending upon whom you ask. In a Washington Post article on Howard University's plan to develop an African-centered curriculum, reporter Keith Harriston, defined "an African-centered approach" as "a point of view that would inject into many areas of the curriculum a new emphasis on the culture, contributions and educational needs of people of African descent."[1]

According to one of its proponents, an African centered curriculum has two parts. First, it is an educational process that is centered around the cultural heritage of African Americans. Secondly, it is the infusion of content that "will stimulate and/or reinforce the growth and development of African and African-American mental and ethical traits..."[2] Molefi Asante describes a three-step process in Afrocentric education: 1) the writing of documents that would fill in the gaps of knowledge that exist in the current curriculum; 2) cleansing the curriculum of pejoratives and negative expressions; and, 3) the infusion of new information to balance the curriculum.[3]

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[1] Keith Harriston, "As Howard U. Plans Its Future, Afrocentricity Question Looms," The Washington Post, Sunday March 10, 1991, 81.

[2] Wade W. Nobles, "The Infusion of African and African-American Content: A Question of Content and Intent," Infusion of African and African American Content in the School Curriculum: Proceedings of the First National Conference, October 1989. Edited by Asa G. Hilliard II et al. Morristown, N.J.: Aaron Press, 1990.

[3] Molefi Asante, The Afrocentric Idea, Reprint. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987.

The Afrocentric movement is based upon a body of scholarship referred to as the Nile Valley School. Its major tenent is that Egypt was a black African society and that the failure to treat Egypt in this context is due to intentional bias on the part of white scholars, especially during the 19th century.[4] Afrocentrism attributes to the Egyptians the origins of modern medicine, mathematics, ancient philosophy, and aeronautics; notes that Aristotle, Plato, and Pythagoras studied in Egypt, and insists that knowledge of this history and culture will help African American students improve their academic performance and self-esteem.[5]

Two important Nile Valley scholars are Cheikh Anta Diop, the late Senegalese scholar and Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, professor of African Studies at Rutgers University. Diop's work The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality, first published in French in 1955, is the underlying force behind Nile Valley scholarship. Ivan Van Sertima's They Came Before Columbus (Random House 1977) provides evidence that links Africa and South America in pre-Columbian times.

African-centered Education: Why Do We Need It?

The Nile Valley School consists of African American scholars in the African-American and Black Studies departments of several universities. They fall roughly into two major categories. First, there are the African and African American historians who are attempting to correct what they perceive to be historical accuracies, omissions and distortions in past and current scholarship with regard to African history. Examples of these scholars are John Henrik Clarke of Hunter College; Molefi Asante of Temple University, Wade Nobles of San Francisco State University; and, Leonard Jeffries of City College, New York.

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[4] See Cheikh Anta Diop, The African Origin of Civilization, Ed. Trs. by Mercer Cook. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974 and Martin Bernal, Black Athena:The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, Volume I. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

[5] Debra Viadero, "Battle Over Multicultural Education Rises In Intensity," Education Week, Volume X, Number 13, November 28, 1990, 11.

In the second group are social scientists concerned about the general poor academic achievement and socio-economic survival of African American children, e.g., Dr. Asa Hilliard of Georgia State University and Dr. Naim Akbar of Florida State University.

The Nile Valley scholars believe that the existing curriculum, which is overwhelmingly white and European in outlook and content, reinforces insensitivity among whites and leaves black children feeling inferior and disconnected from their studies. They point out several specific omissions and distortions in the curriculum as currently taught in most school systems and universities. The following is a summary of curriculum deficiencies in the teaching about African people as delineated by Asa Hilliard:[6]

1. **"There is no significant history of African people in most academic disciplines before the slave trade."**

   The major part of the history of African people is virtually ignored. The history of early, man, the role that Africa played in the rise of early civilization, Africa's part in world leadership in ancient times, and the powerful influence of Africa on European culture is completely ignored.

2. **"There is virtually no 'people history'."**

   The history of African people is presented, if at all, in episodes and fragments. Nowhere can students gain a sense of holism about the descendants of Africans and place Africans in their evolution with continuity and thematic treatment. "Person history is sprinkled almost as an affirmative action quota in some textbooks. People history is virtually absent."

3. **"There is virtually no history of Africans in the African diaspora."**

   Students do not get a sense that the descendants of African people are scattered all over the globe, e.g.; in Brazil, Fiji, the interior of the Philippines, and in Dravidian India. Nor do they know when and how they arrived at these locations.

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[6] Asa Hilliard, "Introduction," Infusion of African and African American Content in the School Curriculum: Proceedings of the First National Conference, October 1989. Edited by Asa G. Hilliard II et al. Morristown, N.J.: Aaron Press, 1990. pp xx-xxi.

4. **"There is no presentation of the cultural unity among Africans and the descendants of Africans in the African diaspora."**

   Treatments of African people almost universally tend to emphasize physical and cultural difference among Africans. Cultural unities that may exist are overlooked. (The Sahara is treated as a line on the map that separates "black" Africa from "white" Africa.)

5. **"There is generally little or no history of the resistance of African people to the domination of Africans through slavery, colonization, and segregation/apartheid."**

   Students could easily get the idea that African people were passive in the face of oppression and would have few, if any, role models for resistance to oppression which throughout the world has been vigorous, continuing and unrelenting.

6. **"The history of African people that is presented fails to explain the common origin and elements in systems of oppression that African people have experienced, especially during the last 400 years."**

To correct these omissions and distortions, the Nile Valley scholars suggest the development of an African story line based on ten principles simultaneously in several academic areas. They suggest that the story line then be infused into the existing curriculum. The goal, says Hilliard, "is not to replace one academic chauvinism with another or to create false pictures of African people, but to provide information that presents students with a more total truth about the human experience." [7]

The ten organizing principles are:[8]

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Unpublished document, Atlanta, GA Public Schools.

1. Africa is the cradle of early humans, of all six of the earliest hominids.
2. Africa is the cradle of modern humans, homo sapiens.
3. Africa is the cradle of civilization.
4. Africa once held a position as world teacher.
5. There was and still is a continent wide cultural unity despite the great diversity in Africa.
6. The first African movement throughout the world came as a result of a series of migrations, that took place over thousands of years.
7. Africa has been under siege for nearly 2,000 years, and only most recently from European slavery and colonization. Asiatics, Greeks, Romans, Muslims, and lastly Europeans have taken turns invading and sometimes colonizing the African continent.
8. There is an African diaspora all over the world today.
9. African people have stubbornly resisted domination of the continent and in the diaspora.
10. Even under slavery, colonization, and segregation, apartheid, African people have made monumental cultural contributions in the arts, sciences, humanities, politics, and in every facet of the human experience.

Both Hilliard and Asante warn that "similar efforts must be mounted for other geocultural groups in order for us to have a comprehensive picture of the true human story."[9] According to Asante, there must be "pluralism without hierarchy."[10]

Critics

Africa-centered education has many critics. Some mainstream scholars maintain that the major tenets of the Nile Valley School are historically inaccurate; that the rhetoric of the advocates of an African-centered curriculum are racially divisive and that, in some instances, they represent a new form of racial intolerance.

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[9] Hilliard, Op Cit., xxiv and Molefi Asante, "The Afrocentric Idea."

[10] Asante, Ibid.

Egyptologists and classical historians say Nile Valley scholarship is weak. [11] They contend that the scholarship

- is often poorly documented
- is full of political rhetoric
- seeks to indoctrinate rather than investigate data
- inaccurately and unhistorically used modern-day terminology to describe and explain ancient cultures
- is full of historical inaccuracies, and
- fails to use established and current research even when it includes important new information on Africa.

Afrocentrism is also criticized by those who oppose multiculturalism in general, who tend to believe that writing an all-inclusive history is unnecessary, if not impossible. Then, there are those who resist any attempt to revise the history as it is currently taught.

Need for A Multicultural Curriculum

More and more voices, however, are being heard expressing the need to correct the omissions and distortions in the history of the United States and the world, the need to reflect the ethnic diversity of our nation; in short the need for a multicultural curriculum. Approaches range between what has been called the "separatist/particularist" approach that some critics accuse the Afrocentrists of promoting those scholars who defend the "status quo."[12]

At its 70th Annual Meeting, in Anaheim, California, in November of 1990, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) passed a resolution deploring the fact that a "disparate group of European immigrants, viewed as a single culture, has

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[11] See Frank J. Yurco,"Were the Ancient Egyptians Black or White" and "Queries and Comments: Were the Ancient Eygptians of the Black Race" in Biblical Archaeology Review, September/October 1989, Vol. XV No.5 and Frank M. Snowden, Jr., "Bernal's 'Blacks,' Herodotus, and Other Classical Evidence," Arethusa Special Issue (Fall 1989), 83-93.

[12] The CHART Project, a transcript of the "First Seminar on Education for A Diverse Society" Philadelphia, PA, January 7-8, 1991, 65. See also, Diane Ravitch, "Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures," The American Scholar, Volume 69, Number 3, Summer 1990. Reprint

inaccurately come to represent the history of the United States," and called upon publishers to provide textbooks and other instructional materials that accurately portray the pluralism of American society and the contributions various ethnic groups have made to its development.[13]

While most American and world history textbooks have recently begun to include the history of other ethnic groups, their treatment is uneven, with little emphasis given to the thoughts and activities of those who are not of European descent. The challenge, according to many scholars is to find or produce a history that is more than a mere collection of ever increasing amounts of information on people, events, dates and places, to produce a richer, more accurate history and to develop a curriculum that promotes and appreciation for the richness of the cultural diversity in our community, nation and the world.[14]

According to the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, the goal of multicultural education "the development of individuals who are able to function in a culturally diverse society. This mandates an educational process that will:

1. develop self acceptance and pride in one's own culture;
2. develop acceptance, understanding and appreciation of other cultures and respect for those cultures;
3. provide accurate knowledge about the life, history, heritage, life styles and value systems of other cultures; and,
4. develop appreciation of cultural diversity and the way in which it contributes to the strength of the nation."[15]

With a population composed of individuals and groups form virtually every major nation on the globe, the District of Columbia Public Schools has long recognized the need for a multicultural approach. The school system has provided a number of programs that address the educational needs of various elements of its diverse

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[13] Resolution passed by NCSS at its 70th Annual Meeting in Anaheim, California, November 1990.

[14] Robert L. Harris, Jr., "From Inclusion to Interpretation: Teaching Afro-American History in the 1980's." The Social Studies, January/February, 1983, 46.

[15] From A World of Difference: A Prejudice Awareness Campaign created by the Anti-Defamation League in partnership with W*USA TV Channel 9, Washington, D.C. 1986.

cultural and ethnic constituency. Ninety-six percent of our students are "minorities." Ninety percent of the total student population is African American. The language minority student enrollment is rapidly increasing.

Consequently, the District of Columbia Public Schools is in the process of implementing a plan to develop a multicultural curriculum. The plan is in direct response to interests expressed by the community for our schools to develop in all students a better understanding of and appreciation for the history, culture and contributions of ethnic and minority groups to America and the world.

Two assumptions underlie the design and implementation of the plan. The first assumption is that all students have a need to learn and value their own history, culture and achievements and to understand their roles in contributing to the continuum of history. The curriculum will be developed in such a way that all children may answer the questions: "Who in the world am I; where in the world am I; and How in the world did I get here."[16] Where scholars disagree on historical facts and interpretation, all sides will be presented and the opportunity used to help students develop critical thinking skills such as distinguishing fact from opinion, detecting bias, judging the reliability of sources, distinguishing between primary and secondary sources, and drawing conclusions.

Secondly, the school system believes that all students should be exposed to the diversity of peoples, cultures and backgrounds in America and the world. Within the next few years, the curricula for all grades and subject areas will begin to reflect the knowledge, culture and contributions of all of the ethnic groups represented in our community.

At the same time, the curriculum will attempt to address attitudinal changes that must accompany any serious attempt to help students develop an appreciation for diversity and eliminate the stereotypes and misinformation among all ethnic groups in our city that have a negative impact on school and community life. Strategies that emphasize critical thinking and teach cooperative

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[16] Hilliard, Op Cit, xxii.

learning will be used to help students learn to appreciate diversity without prejudice.[17]

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[17] See Debbie Walsh, "Critical Thinking to Reduce Prejudice," Social Education, April/May,. 1988, 280-282 and Brenda D. Conrad, "Cooperative Learning and Prejudice Reduction," Social Education, April/May 1988, 283-286.

About The Author

Frances J. Powell is curriculum director for social studies in the District of Colubia Public Schools. She has a Masters Degree in world history from Georgetown University and a Doctor of Arts in History from the Catholic University of America, both in Washington, D.C.